

A PREVIOUSLY UNREPORTED "SEA SERPENT" SIGHTING IN THE SOUTH ATLANTIC

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ABSTRACT: A casual conversation has resulted in a new, previously unreported "sea serpent" sighting being introduced into the historical record. Captain J. Koopman wrote in his memoirs about a "sea serpent" sighted in 1906 about 40 nautical miles off the coast of Brazil. The observation occurred less than 100 kilometers south of the location of the sighting reported by Meade-Waldo and Nicoll in the same year. Whether the same kind of animal was involved in both incidents is not clear.

Cryptozoology is characterized by a paucity of solid data. Every shred of direct observation, every new sighting, adds to the weight of evidence, but the reporting of new evidence has always been difficult. The International Society of Cryptozoology was formed to provide a sympathetic environment for the dissemination of knowledge about creatures of doubtful existence. That the Society is already playing a useful role is illustrated by the manner in which the sighting described below was brought to light, and is now part of the historical record.

I was explaining my interest in cryptozoology to Jean Paelinck, a professor of economics at Erasmus University, Rotterdam, Holland, and a colleague on a scientific commission of the University of Quebec, when he exclaimed: "But, my grandfather saw a sea-serpent!" After a life at sea with the Dutch merchant marine, Professor Paelinck's grandfather, Captain J. Koopman, had returned home to write his memoirs. Professor Paelinck later sent me a copy of the relevant passage. Here is the story.

It was 1906. Captain Koopman was at that time an officer on a merchant vessel steaming from the Mediterranean to Montevideo, Uruguay. He writes in his memoirs:

On a Sunday afternoon, at about 3 o'clock, I was on watch. The sea was flat as a mirror and seemed to reflect the heat as well as the light. Except for the engine room crew and the officers on watch, the whole ship's crew lay asleep on deck, half undressed, under an improvised tent. In the distance, there was a sailing vessel, with its sails loosely flapping in the wind. I changed course by a few degrees so as to be able to read its name and home port with my telescope, in order to report its position upon arrival in Montevideo.

Koopman goes on to relate how difficult it was to see the ship's flag with the sails flapping, but that he could manage to read its name (which he couldn't recall) and its home port (Hamburg). He then writes:

I was still standing in the middle of the bridge, with my telescope pointed at that sailing ship when the wheelman suddenly shouted: "Sir! Sir! Look over there, on starboard!" The canvas screen which normally protected the watch officer from wind and spray was lowered over its entire length, on account of the oppressive heat, so that I had an unobstructed field of view. I saw, about one hundred metres away, obliquely on starboard, an enormous beast whose length I approximated at about 60 metres. It was overtaking our ship, which appeared to be standing still, with the speed of an arrow off a bow. With the help of my telescope, I could form some idea of the monster, although only in an approximate fashion. The monstrous head and a number of enormous dorsal fins sticking out above water level, as well as its wide wake, showed the nearly horizontal posture of this giant sea-dragon or serpent.

We were, at that time, about 40 sea miles (about 74 km) offshore from Pernambuco. The coast thus lay well below the horizon; nevertheless, I saw that town, upside down, profiled sharply against the sky: an impressive *fata-morgana*. The wheelman and I pointed out to the officers and crew the charming optical illusion. However, we chose to hide the matter of the sea-serpent, for fear of ridicule.

The pattern is familiar. The mirage, backed by a solid body of refraction theory (Fraser and Mach 1976) is accepted and admired by all. The "sea-serpent," on the other hand, is an anomalous event, beyond the borders of science, best filed away in silence.

No further details are given, and Koopman assures us that "he would never have brought the matter up again, had not a study related to the sea-serpent quite accidentally come into his hands." The study in question was the description published by Meade-Waldo and Nicoll (1906), of an unknown marine creature off the coast of Brazil. This sighting is also discussed in Heuvelmans (1968: 372). Koopman was greatly encouraged by the attention given to such a phenomenon in the scientific press, and concluded his description of the incident as follows: "Is it not quite remarkable that Meade [-Waldo] saw this animal at the end of 1905 on the Brazilian coast, at nearly the same point on the globe where we would, a few months later, observe an identical phenomenon?"

The two observations are indeed very close in space. Pernambuco (usually called Recife) is at 8°06'S, 34°53'W, so that Koopman's sighting, approximately 75 km to the east, would have occurred at about 8°06'S, 34°13'W. Meade-Waldo and Nicoll give their position as 7°14'S, 34°25'W, less than 100 km to the north. That the same kind of animal was seen is not clear from the descriptions given. Koopman's report is very much less detailed than that provided by the trained naturalists; it also mentions a "number of dorsal fins" rather than one "large fin." However, there must have been some similarity in order for Koopman to speak in terms of an identical phenomenon.

Any attempt at classification of the Koopman sighting must remain very tentative. The multiplicity of fins observed suggests that the creature might belong to Heuvelmans' (1976: 562) "many finned" class, in contrast to other

observations in the same area (Heuvelmans 1968: 554), which fall into the "super-eel" category.

I thank Professor Jean Paelinck for sending me the extract from Captain Koopman's memoirs, and for granting permission for the publication of this information. Professor W. Opechowski provided invaluable assistance in the translation of the sighting from the Dutch original.

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